Transforming global evidence: AI-Driven evidence synthesis for policymaking' Funding Opportunity: Applicant Webinar Q&A

Wednesday, 9 October 2024

Funding

Q: The total fund amount is £11.5m, and individual projects can be budgeted up to 11.5m. Does this mean potentially only 1 project will be funded?

A: Our ambition is to fund one infrastructure investment. Applicants should therefore ensure that the project team are suitably expert to deliver this ambitious infrastructure investment. The maximum contribution from ESRC is £9.2m and the maximum total project cost is £11.5m.

Q: What is the rationale for not implementing a programme approach to this call and funding several complementary projects?

A: The rationale stems from the aim to invest in a single, ambitious overarching infrastructure. As set out in the funding opportunity, analysis suggests that a significant constraint in getting the best research in front of policymakers is a lack of capacity, capability and infrastructure to carry out high quality and timely evidence-synthesis at scale and in a cost-effective manner. This suggests the need for a comprehensive, holistic approach to the development of a transformational infrastructure to make bodies of knowledge accessible, relevant and actionable for decisionmakers.

We believe this can be best managed by a single consortium, led by a strong and diverse leadership team of internationally recognised evidence synthesis experts. As set out in the funding opportunity we would expect the demonstrator projects to address different policy areas and draw on relevant disciplinary knowledge.

Q: What level of institutional commitment is expected?

A: Standard UKRI rules apply, with ESRC meeting 80% of costs and the host research organisations (RO) expected to contribute the other 20% cost to meet the 100% FEC contribution. Exceptions will apply for any justified costings eligible to be paid at 100% FEC. We would encourage significant institutional commitment from the host organisation, both to show their support of the application but also their commitment to the enduring sustainability of the infrastructure once the ESRC funding ends.

Q: If the max ESRC contribution is £9.2m, can the FEC figure be higher (which it may be if costs for international project co-lead costs are included?)

A: The maximum FEC for this project is £11.5m.

Q: The call says it will cover costs for the project co-lead (International). Does this include costs for their team(s), or is it specifically costs for an individual?

A: Applications that include an eligible project co-lead (International) can include costs for research staff supporting the project co-lead (International). Where the individual is recruited and employed by the international research organisation (RO) to support the project co-lead (International), these direct costs will be paid at 100%. In cases where the individual is employed by a UK organisation but seconded to the international RO, costs will be paid at 80%.

UKRI only covers specific costs of project co-leads (International) involved in applications led by UK project leads, up to a limit of 30% of the overall cost of the project (this limit also includes any justified and eligible exception costings for UK business, third sector and government organisations). All costs must be fully justified and will be assessed in the context of the proposal as a whole. See the [UKRI project co-lead (International) policy – UKRI](#) for full guidance regarding project co-leads (International) and details of exceptions when involving partners from countries on the OECD DAC list (excluding India and China).

Q: Can UK government staff (e.g. DWP/DCMS/DSIT etc.) be project co-leads?

A: When a project includes a project co-lead (PcL) from a UK business, third sector or government organisation please ensure that all associated costs are fully justified within the Resources and Costs Justification section of your application. ESRC will fund 100% of eligible costs where these have been sufficiently justified. However, the project costs associated with these types of PcL contributions must not exceed 30% of the overall cost of the grant (at 100% FEC). As travel and subsistence costs are the only costs that can be claimed for a UK government organisation project team member, these can be claimed as exceptions in your application as 'UK government organisation T and S costs' at 100% FEC.

Leadership team & partners

Q: Is the emphasis on a single 'project lead' deliberate?

A: UKRI requires each application to have a project lead. In this funding opportunity we emphasise the importance of the project team and the diversity of knowledge and skills required across the team. However, your application must have a named project lead from an organisation eligible to apply for UKRI funding.

The project lead is responsible for the intellectual leadership and overall management of the project. They are the main contact for UKRI. To be the project lead you must be affiliated with the 'lead organisation' on the application. The lead organisation and any collaborating research organisations should have agreed to provide all necessary support for the proposed project if it is successful.

The project lead should have an explicit agreement with the organisation that this will last for at least the duration of the UKRI funding. By submitting an application, an organisation is confirming that named applicants are capable of taking part in a UKRI-funded project and will accept its relevant terms and conditions. For further details see the UKRI website: [Roles in funding applications: eligibility, responsibilities and costings guidance – UKRI](#).

Q: Do potential partners on the application have to be based in the UK?

A: International business, third sector or government organisations cannot be included as project co-leads. Applications can include project partners from international business, third sector or government organisations. International third-party individuals or organisations, not eligible to be employed on the application but contributing to the project can be included in your application as either 'project partners', 'subcontractors' or 'consultants'. For further detail please see the: [ESRC research funding guide for the UKRI Funding Service – UKRI](#).

Q: Does "(excluding India and China)" mean that ESRC will not fund any costs for partners in India or China?

A: For any international project co-lead (PcL (I)s) from India or China included in your application, justified and eligible exception costings at 100% can be claimed. However, unlike other countries on the OECD DAC list, any costs claimed for PcL (I)s from these two countries will be subject to the UKRI 30% cost limit for international and UK business, third sector or government PcLs.

Q: Do the partners have to be universities/research institutions?

A: UK based project co-leads can be based in business, third sector or government organisations. Project co-leads from international business, third sector or government organisations **cannot** be included as part of the application core team. Collaborating organisations, both UK and international (not just universities and research institutes), who will have an integral role in the proposed research, can be included as project partners in the application. These collaborating individuals or organisations can be included in your application as either 'project partners', 'subcontractors' or 'consultants'.

An organisation or individual can be both a project partner and subcontractor on a project ('dual role'), however, this must be justified in your application and will be subject to expert review. A dual role may be required, for example, when an organisation or individual is contributing to the project in kind but is selected to deliver other work to the project involving substantial costs to be covered via a subcontract. For more information please see the [ESRC research funding guide for the UKRI Funding Service – UKRI](#).

Q: A lot of the international leaders in the evidence synthesis community are not based in universities - can you explain the decision to exclude them as potential international co-leads please?

A: In the funding opportunity we emphasise the importance of the project team and the diversity of knowledge and skills required across the team. We are following standard UKRI guidance on who is eligible as an international project co-lead (PcL(I)). Any academic researcher from an established international research organisation which has the capacity and capability to conduct the specified work will be eligible for the role of project co-lead (International).

Profit making organisations and international government departments are not eligible as project co-lead organisations. Regarding third sector/ not for profit organisations, it is the responsibility of the host UK research organisation (RO) to determine whether, exceptionally, the PcL(I)s organisation is eligible under UKRI requirements. The Host UK RO are required to determine whether the third sector organisation has the necessary capacity and capability

to meet UKRI eligibility criteria. For more information see UKRI guidance: ESRC-300924-ProjectCoLeadInternationalPolicy-ESRCGuidance.pdf (ukri.org). Please see details in the question above in reference to adding collaborating individuals and organisations as project partners to an application.

However, exceptionally, we will consider applications that do not include a PcL (I) but do include international collaborators that are not eligible to be included as PcL (I)s under standard UKRI policy. To be considered as meeting our application criteria the international collaborator must be integral to the project and the project leadership team. International collaborators can be included as project partners, sub-contractors (and/or dual roles project partners and sub-contractors) and/or consultants.

Q: On government organisations being project co-leads - can government agencies that are PSREs claim costings?

A: A list of eligible Public Sector Research Establishments (PSREs) can be found at: Eligible and potential eligible public sector research establishments – UKRI. These organisations are eligible for research funding under standard UKRI terms with ESRC supporting 80% of the 100% FEC costings and the PSRE expected to meet the other 20% costings. Any PSRE that is not currently on the list of eligible PSREs wishing to apply to be an eligible organisation will need to follow the guidance in the link above.

Q: As DSIT have a focus on this area, are we able to discuss this with DSIT colleagues?

A: DSIT is a co-funder of this opportunity and a key stakeholder. ESRC will facilitate introductions to the successful applicants. We ask you not to contact any stakeholders listed under the 'What we are looking for' section' (headed 'Partnership') of the UKRI Funding Finder page at this stage: Transforming global evidence: AI-Driven evidence synthesis for policymaking – UKRI.

Q: Can we approach ESRC investments to work with us on this application?

A: You are welcome to contact and work with ESRC investments and What Works centres. In the funding opportunity we signalled that ESRC will be a key partner in the delivery of this opportunity and gave some examples of our investments and connections. We ask that you do not contact partners such as DSIT or the UN at this stage. They have committed to work with the successful applicants so do not need to be listed as a partner on the application.

Q: Can you please talk through working with UN SDG Synthesis team?

A: The UN associated Global SGD Synthesis Coalition is a key partner on this investment. They have committed to working with the grant recipients to ensure that they are accelerating progress to the UN Sustainability Development Goals. ESRC will facilitate introductions between the successful applicants and the UN SDG Synthesis team, once the investment has been awarded. We expect the successful applicant to work closely with the Global SGD Synthesis Coalition during the 9-month scoping, engagement and co-design phase.

Q: What if bidders already have links to UN agencies (e.g. UNICEF, UNESCO?)

A: We would ask that you do not contact any stakeholders listed under the 'What we are looking for section' (headed 'Partnership') on the UKRI Funding Finder page about your application at this stage.

Q: Is there any limitation preventing researchers from the same institution participating in different proposal teams? Will it be possible to be a co-applicant on more than one application?

A: There is no restriction on researchers from the same institution being named on multiple applications. Project team members should not exceed the maximum amount of time that one applicant can request for funding, across all UKRI projects, i.e. 1,650 hours a year, equivalent to 37.5 hours a week, 44 weeks a year. It is the responsibility of the research organisation to have a process in place which monitors the time claimed by any applicant to ensure that no more than 100% of full time equivalent (FTE) is claimed as salary for any individual across all grants funded by UKRI. Researchers are advised to discuss this with their research organisation's funding office.

Q: Is it desirable to have commercial partners, e.g. those producing state-of-the-art LLMs, and, if so, how can they be funded?

A: This will depend on the organisation's contribution to the project. If the UK Partner is making a significant contribution to the project ESRC allow the inclusion of UK business and third sector project co-leads: please see guidance: Inclusion of UK business, third sector or government body Co-Is on ESRC proposals (ukri.org). If the partner is a UK or international partner contributing to the project they can be included in your application as either 'project partners', 'subcontractors' or 'consultants'. For further detail please see the: ESRC research funding guide for the UKRI Funding Service – UKRI.

Social sciences remit

Q: How is it going to be assessed that at least 50% of the project focuses on social sciences? Isn't this a contradiction with requiring that the project does not focus on a specific scientific theme or domain?

A: You can find a list of areas within ESRC's remit on our website: Remit, portfolio and priorities – ESRC – UKRI. The application should demonstrate how the proposed infrastructure will move social sciences evidence synthesis forward, respond to policymakers' needs (refer to the Nesta report for details) and align with the UN SDGs. The proposed approach should be transferable and replicable and should not be limited to a specific subject area within the social sciences. The 50% remit requirement allows flexibility for applicants to bring insights from other disciplines, where appropriate.

Q: The call has large emphasis on building infrastructure capabilities. How do these AI tools count towards the 50% mark for ESRC limit? Or is technology generally considered 'social sciences' in this case?

A: As long as the tools created are deployed in support of social sciences then the activity would fall within the remit of social sciences.

Q: Is the expectation that the project lead will be a social scientist? Or would it be sufficient to meet the 50% social sciences criteria across the project, but with the lead being, e.g. an expert in AI?

A: There is no restriction on the disciplinary background of the project lead. We only specify the skills and experience required across the leadership team and that at least 50% of the project is in the remit of social sciences.

Q: How will you measure the % of 'focus and effort' from the social sciences? Will it be based on spend, for example?

A: We will not specifically look at detailed costings to assess this. We will focus on the proposed work programme – both the delivery plans and their intended impact.

Q: Do you have a preference for specific subjects? Would law and digital regulation be within the scope?

A: We would advise you to look at the Nesta report and the UN SDGs to guide you in selecting the areas which the demonstrator projects will cover. Law and digital regulation would be in the scope of social sciences.

Application process & assessment

Q: The Approach section of the application form is limited to 2000 words, which is shorter than a standard grant (as 2500 words) - is this correct? It seems very short for something of this scale and complexity, even considering that the 'Vision' section is longer than standard at 1000 words (standard research grant Vision section is limited to 500 words)

A: The word count limit for the Vision is 1000 words. The word count for the Approach is 2000 words. We are limited to a total of 3000 words for these two sections and have chosen to give you more space to set out the strategic aims of the project than in a standard application.

Q: How will you be sourcing peer reviewers for this call? Are there opportunities to contribute to this process?

A: We are looking for a broad range of expertise to assess applications – people with knowledge of evidence synthesis, artificial intelligence, international collaboration and the SDGs, and the science-policy interface.

If you are not applying for the opportunity and believe that you have suitable expertise to support the UKRI peer review process for this opportunity, please contact us: aievidencesynthesis@esrc.ukri.org

Q: How will you be assessing the stakeholder co-design element (i.e. first 9 months) in proposals?

A: We will be looking for you to evidence plans for genuine co-design and proposals to co-produce the work over the life of the grant. This will require engagement with the stakeholders we identify in the opportunity and also those that your team has identified.

Evidence synthesis

Q: What is meant by evidence synthesis? Can you provide examples?

A: Evidence synthesis refers to the process of bringing together the best available relevant evidence to answer a specific question. It is based on a rigorous and systematic approach to searching, identifying, collating, quality appraising, and analysing relevant evidence from multiple studies, based on pre-defined criteria, to inform scientific understanding and decision-making on specific issues. This includes the production of evidence and gap maps, rapid or systematic evidence reviews, realist reviews and living evidence reviews, as well as the design of tools and methods to communicate evidence synthesis outputs effectively to policymakers. The most effective evidence synthesis is often an ongoing iterative process co-owned by synthesis producers and users. For example. the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition has produced syntheses, such as Partnership-Pillar-Synthesis-Report-Final.pdf (sdgsynthesiscoalition.org)

Q: Is this call interested in how grey literature might be incorporated into evidence synthesis of peer-reviewed literature?

A: Yes. As detailed in the guidance, it is expected that work will initially focus on published research and grey literature (for example, government and international evaluations). The UN, for example, holds a database of roughly 25,000 evaluations, with over 4000 reports being published since 2021 and you should consider how to interpret and use this evidence. Longer term, you should investigate the potential opportunity to also integrate relevant raw data streams.

AI technology

Q: You name-checked a specific kind of AI technology - generative AI. Is this an indication that the "tool production" is expected to be based on e.g. chatbots and LLM technologies and not other AI/NLP techniques.

A: Any AI technology, tools, techniques and machine learning that the applicant judges to be appropriate against the defined objectives can be included in the application.

Q: Do you have a sense of the relative effort you are seeking on developing platforms and tools; and conducting demonstration reviews? And does platform/tool development fall within ESRC scope?

A: There is flexibility for applicants to provide a proposal that matches the ambition of the investment. We are looking for applicants to provide a sense of what they think the relative effort should be on tools/platforms that would deliver against the defined objectives. That

said, platform and tool development is referred to in the context of knowledge exchange with policy stakeholders. Platform/tool development should be focused on the needs of the end users, namely the translation of social sciences evidence for policymakers, which falls within the ESRCs remit. Similarly, evidence synthesis products and demonstration projects should focus on areas of interest as identified in the Nesta report.

Policy engagement/building capacity

Q: Building infrastructure by itself will not necessarily lead to greater use of evidence by policy makers. How much do you expect the bid to include broader policy engagement/capacity building that we know is essential?

A: One of the key strategic aims of this opportunity is to improve the accessibility and useability of evidence synthesis for decision makers. It is essential that the bid has capability / capacity to engage with policy makers, understand their needs and ensure the proposed work programme responds to the needs of policymakers, national and international. This includes enhancing capability and capacity development with both potential producers and users of evidence synthesis, including contributing to broader efforts to improve capacity for using evidence in policy making. The initial 9-month co-design phase will provide the successful applicant with scope to test and refine their proposal with key stakeholders, including policy makers.

Q: Regarding ECR and Policy practitioner development, can we link to the Doctoral Training Centre/Doctoral Training Partnership provision?

A: The Doctoral Training Partnerships are one of ESRC's skills investments. You are welcome to work with them. We can link the successful applicant with colleagues who manage this portfolio of skills investments.

Q: Given one of the aims of the call is to build capability amongst relevant public and civil service professionals to apply evidence-synthesis in policymaking. What do you have in mind here? Can you provide an example concerning the scope?

A: It will be for the applicant to consult with policy makers and others already working in this area to determine the most appropriate mechanisms to build capability. This could include training, the development of digital tools, people mobility or other initiatives.

Other

Q: Where can I find the NESTA scoping report?

A: https://www.bi.team/publications/international-collaboration-evidence/